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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Last Vietnam veteran pilot retires from Guard

By Roger C. Anderson, Information Officer

RAPID CITY, S.D. - For forty years, the aviation section of the South Dakota National Guard relied heavily on the skills and experience of "seasoned" pilots and crew chiefs that served in the Vietnam War.

That era ended recently when the last of those helicopter pilots, Col. Dennis Miller, retired from the National Guard as the state aviation officer for the South Dakota Army National Guard after 37 years of flying.

"I saw the helicopter's use in battle grow from the infancy of airmobile and air assault to the dynamic role it plays today," said Miller.

Miller was one of dozens of veteran pilots that returned from Vietnam and joined the South Dakota National Guard. Flying 513 hours in the combat zone, he went on to accumulate 4,700 hours in the air helping fight forest fires in the Black Hills and rescuing people in need during blizzards and ice storms.

Not only was he proficient in flying the UH-1 helicopter, better known as the "Huey," Miller also flew the smaller OH-6 and OH-58 models. When the Guard modernized its aviation section in the late 1990's, he became the first South Dakota pilot to qualify in the UH-60 Blackhawk and became the state's first UH-60 maintenance test pilot.

"I wanted to fly ever since I was a kid," he said. "It's hard to believe that a ticket to Vietnam would impact my entire life the way it did."

Growing up on a farm near Canova, S.D., Miller went on to earn a degree in mechanized agriculture at SDSU. Miller enrolled in the Army's advanced ROTC aviation program and received a commission in the Transportation Corps in 1970.

"I had a low draft number and knew I was going to Vietnam," said Miller. "I wanted to be in the air rather than in the jungle."

He completed his pilot training at Fort Wolters, Texas, and Fort Rucker, Ala. He remembers his instructor pilot got out of his helicopter and said, "It's all yours," after only 15 hours of dual instruction.

Trying to coordinate the use of both hands and feet, Miller began his solo flight and the aircraft "waddled" everywhere before he finally he finally got over the jitters.

"Everyone goes through that the first time," he said.

He took a 12-week aviation maintenance course at Fort Eustis, Va., and prepared for his one-year tour to Vietnam.

"That's when the reality of it all really hit me," he said. "I was married and we just had our first child. I don't think I was ever scared; I just didn't know what to expect."

He returned to South Dakota, moved his family into a house in Brookings, said his goodbyes, and flew to Travis Air Force Base, Calif.

As he waited in the air base terminal for his flight to Vietnam, the remains of two pilots he had graduated with at flight school 12 weeks earlier arrived with their escorts.

"That heightened my apprehension," remembered Miller. "The reality of going to Vietnam started closing in on me."

Assigned to the 610th Transportation Company at Red Beach, Miller spent several months completing maintenance test flights in the Da Nang area.

"We were always going to the bunkers during mortar attacks and manned the perimeter when attacked," he said.

But it was his next assignment with the 48th Assault Company at Marble Mountain that put Miller in the heat of battle.

The 48th, known as the "Blue Stars," consisted of Hueys and Cobra gun ships. Its mission included resupply, troop insertions and casualty evacuations.

His first troop insertion mission proved to be the most frightful. He'll never forget calmness in the other pilots' radio chatter as they approached the landing zone.

"We were flying in a really tight formation, when all of a sudden the gunship right next to us let go a blast of rockets that streaked right by my window," recalled Miller. "I was not expecting that."

He vividly remembers the chaos that followed as he brought his chopper in for a landing.

“There was crap flying everywhere; the crew chiefs started screaming for the Soldiers to jump out; incoming mortar rounds were exploding; and just like that, we were up and flying again,” he said. “The rush of adrenalin was overwhelming.”

Miller recalled that the Cobra pilots went by the call sign “Joker” and when they started chattering and started in firing on a landing zone – all hell broke loose.

“Several times we had aircraft shot down while on assault,” he said. “But somehow I just never thought it would happen to us. We just kept focused on what we were doing.”

Future missions covered an area from the DMZ down to My Lai, supporting the 101st Airborne at Phu Bai and the Marines in the mountain areas.

It was during this time that he became involved in a mission to rescue a Marine advisory team north of Hue. The Marines were working with the South Vietnamese Army when they were overrun during an NVA offensive near the DMZ.

The rescue involved two Hueys (Miller’s and another) and two Cobra gunships.

“We were in contact with a major and a corporal who were wounded and every time we got ready to extract them the major would break us off because the enemy was closing in on them and they had to move and evade,” said Miller.

His rescue team played a “cat and mouse game” as the Marines were desperately trying to find a way out of the jungle. After several rescue attempts in that two-hour period, the helicopters were critically low on fuel but decided to set up one more attempt.

“We finally got them on board my ship,” Miller said. “I turned and looked at that corporal’s face. He thought he was going to die in that jungle and that we had saved him. You could just see the relief in his eyes.”

Miller finished his tour with the 62nd Aviation Company flying 500 hours in combat and was awarded 13 Air Medals. He remained on active duty until July of 1974 and then began farming near Hecla, S.D.

He joined the South Dakota National Guard in 1977 as a pilot for the 147th Field Artillery Brigade in Pierre and began working full-time for the Guard in 1985.

Dennis and his wife Diane live in Rapid City. They have two adult children, Jacqueline Anderson and Stephen Miller.

SERVICE IN THE SOUTH DAKOTA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

In the South Dakota National Guard, Col. Dennis Miller served as the aviation section leader for the 147th Field Artillery Brigade from August 1977 to September 1978; evacuation pilot for the 1085th Medical Detachment from March 1984 to December 1985;

section leader for the 1085th from 1985 through 1988 and operations officer from 1989 to 1989. He became the commander of the 1085th from 1989 to 1991; aviation logistics officer from 1991 to 1992. In November 1992, Miller became the operations officer for the 88th Troop Command and became the executive officer of the 88th from 1994 to 1995. In September 1995 he took over as aviation operations officer for Headquarters, South Dakota State Area Command (HQ SD STARC), and from 1997 to 2003 was the aviation maintenance officer of HQ SD STARC. By 2003 he had become commander of the Army Aviation Support Facility for HQ SD STARC and from 2005 until he retired in 2007 he served as the state aviation officer for the South Dakota Army National Guard.

DECORATIONS AND AWARDS

Col. Dennis Miller's awards and decorations include the Legion of Merit, Bronze Star, Meritorious Service Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, Air Medal (13 awards), Army Commendation Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, Army Reserve Components Achievement Medal with Silver and Bronze Oak Leaf Clusters, National Defense Service Medal with two Bronze Stars, Vietnam Service Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters, Humanitarian Service Medal, Armed Forces Reserve Medal with Silver Hour Glass, Army Service Ribbon, Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star, Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal, South Dakota National Guard Distinguished Service Award, South Dakota Emergency Operations Ribbon, South Dakota National Guard Service Ribbon with four Oak Leaf Clusters, South Dakota National Guard Desert Storm Ribbon, and Master Aviator Badge.

Miller was recognized on Nov. 3, 2007, with a letter of appreciation from President George W. Bush and a South Dakota Governor's Proclamation. He was honored with the Silver Award of the Honorable Order of Saint Michael, presented to proven Army aviators as special recognition for outstanding contributions to the community of Army aviation. It is awarded by the president of the Army Aviation Association of America.

Col. Miller is a member of the Army Aviation Association of America, the Vietnam Helicopter Pilot's Association and South Dakota Aviation Combat Hall of Fame.

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FOR INFORMATION, please contact Maj. Orson Ward at (605) 737-6721, cell (605) 431-8753.

Photo Cut Line: Col. Dennis Miller retired from the National Guard as the state aviation officer for the South Dakota Army National Guard after 37 years of flying.

Link to photo: <https://sdguard.ngb.army.mil/released/DSC07006.JPG>

NOTE: Since the terrorist attacks on America, the South Dakota National Guard has mobilized more than 3,100 Soldiers and 700 Airmen in support of the Global War on Terror.

Currently, more than 330 Soldiers and Airmen from the South Dakota National Guard remain on duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. More than 3,900 National Guardsmen are available in South Dakota to provide support for state and national emergencies and homeland defense.